

Jeopardy Assessment
for the Proposed Incidental Taking Authorization
of the Butler's Garter Snake

Mequon Nature Preserve Biking/Walking Trail Project
City of Mequon, Ozaukee County, Wisconsin

Background

The state-threatened Butler's garter snake is the smallest of the five Wisconsin garter snake species. Both sexes of this species reach maturity during their second full year and females deliver 4-19 live-born young in mid to late summer. This species requires a moderately open to open canopy habitat, preferably with both upland and wetland habitat. Butler's naturally hibernate in open-canopy wetlands (sedge meadows, fringes of cattail marshes, etc.) but are also known to occupy sites that provide other means for successful overwintering (i.e. old landfills where conditions provide access below the frostline and where adequate moisture exists).

The Butler's garter snake is a colonial species that is restricted to several southeastern counties in Wisconsin. There are currently 30 locations where this species has been documented from 1973 to present. Twenty-five of these records have been documented since 1990. Most sites that have been moderately to heavily surveyed for Butler's show a healthy age-class structure, indicating that regular recruitment is occurring on those sites. Surveys and monitoring since its listing in 1997 reveal that Butler's often occur in very large numbers on relatively small sites (i.e. 400+ snakes detected on a 20-acre site with less than 50% suitable [open canopy] habitat). Three intensive survey/monitoring efforts associated with mitigation for incidental take to date have involved large numbers of Butler's garter snakes (over 1200 Butler's on three isolated sites along Lincoln Creek within the City of Milwaukee). Surveys have also demonstrated that Butler's can occur, sometimes in high numbers, on highly disturbed and degraded sites. One example is the location of 62 Butler's during one survey of a brownfield site in the industrial heart of Milwaukee. Most of the snakes were found under pieces of broken concrete in a large, abandoned, gravel parking lot that was adjacent to a small wetland.

In Summary, the Butler's garter snake is a fast-maturing species with potentially high annual recruitment. It can sustain populations on highly disturbed sites if the disturbance factors are eliminated and suitable wetlands are present on or adjacent to these sites. Since 1997, most sites where Butler's were suspected to occur, based on proximity to known range and habitat and which were subsequently surveyed, verified their presence.

Jeopardy Assessment

The proposed Mequon Nature Preserve Biking and Walking Trail Project will be constructed in suitable Butler's gartersnake habitat that is part of a significant conservation (Tier 3) site. This project has the potential to cause incidental take of the Butler's gartersnake, although the potential for take is extremely low. Snake fencing had already been installed to minimize take and the risk of take is primarily limited to a small wetland fill where a culvert will be installed under the trail in a narrow drainage area.

Required Conditions of the Incidental take Authorization:

1. Snake fencing must be maintained per the Butler's fencing guidelines until project completion.
2. There will be no net loss of suitable habitat for the snake.
3. The suitable habitat being temporarily disturbed must be restored to good quality habitat.

The department has determined that the proposed project is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence or recovery of the state population of these snakes or the whole plant-animal community of which they are a part if the Butler's Gartersnake Conservation Plan is strictly adhered to.